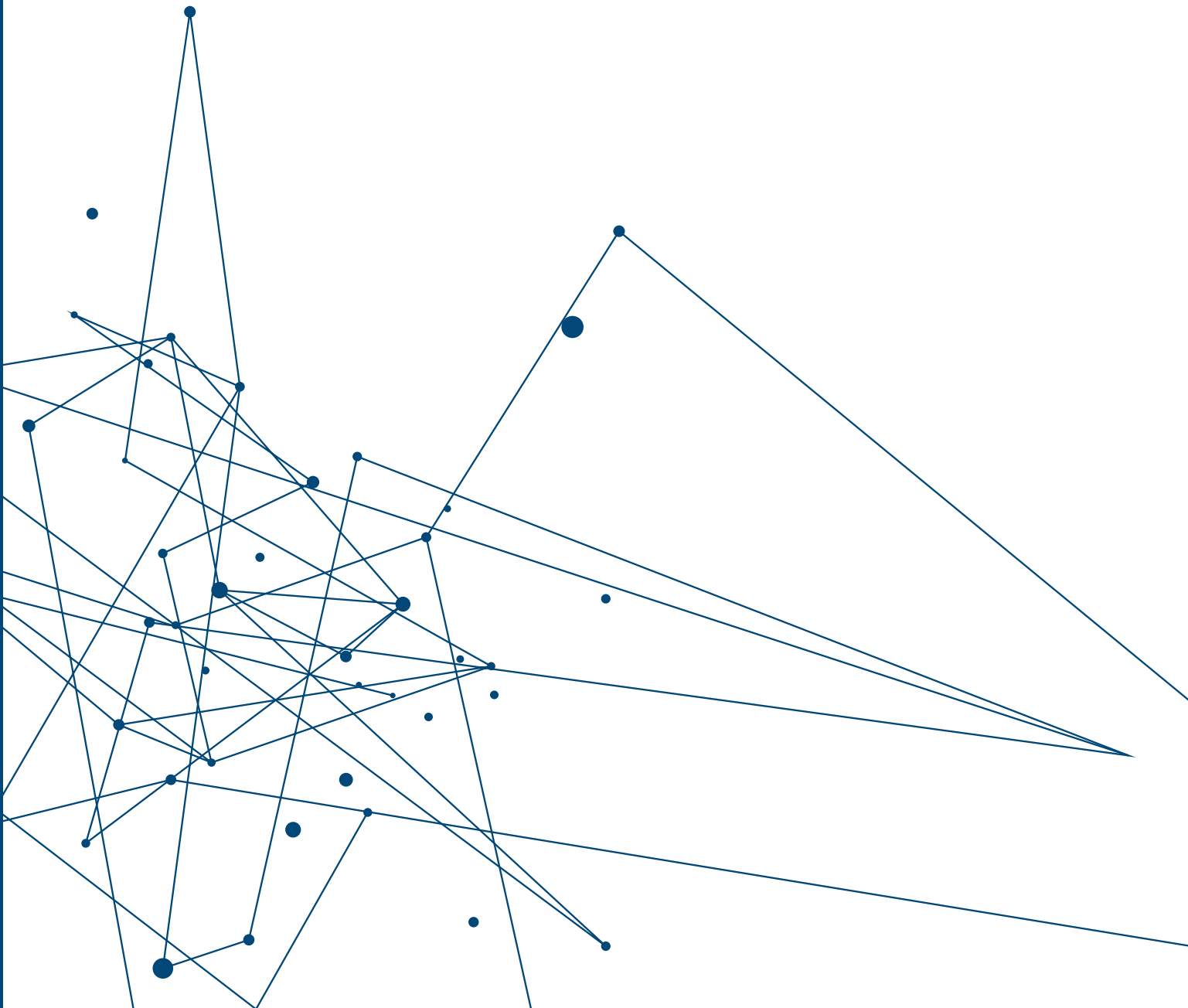


# Swedish and Finnish Perceptions of Turkey's Role in European Security

Minna Ålander and Paul T. Levin



In light of ongoing changes in Europe's security architecture resulting from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this report investigates Finnish and Swedish views on Turkey's place in the emerging arrangements. The report finds that the difficult experience with Turkey during the NATO accession process negatively impacted perceptions of Turkey in both countries, and that there are real divergences between them and Turkey with regard to perceptions and interests. On the other hand, Finnish and Swedish foreign policy and national security officials today acknowledge Turkey's importance as a military power as well as the benefits of maintaining constructive relations with Ankara. The increasing unreliability of the United States as an ally can further underline Turkey's importance in the eyes of the two Nordic NATO members and creates both opportunities and risks for Turkey as European cooperation on defence and security deepens.

This paper is part of a CATS Network Papers series exploring the role of Turkey in a future European security order, particularly in light of the EU's ongoing challenges, first and foremost the war in Ukraine. As part of this series, CATS has commissioned nine country reports on several EU member states, as well as on Ukraine and Turkey, with the aim of identifying both the opportunities and the challenges for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU within an evolving security order.

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1.

# Introduction

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, far from being "brain dead", NATO has yet again found its purpose as a traditional defensive alliance. NATO's renewed relevance was confirmed when the two remaining non-allied Nordic countries – Finland and Sweden – decided to forego decades or, in Sweden's case, centuries of non-alignment and seek to join the Alliance. A significant holdup in the otherwise smooth accession process was Ankara's demands for concessions on a number of Turkish interests. How did this negotiation process affect the two Nordic countries' perceptions of Turkey as an ally? How do Swedish and Finnish foreign and security policy elites view the ongoing transformation of the European security architecture and Turkey's role in it?

This report seeks to provide answers to these questions. Our overarching conclusion is that the perceptions of Turkey in Sweden and Finland deteriorated and trust was undermined by Turkey's instrumental approach to the NATO negotiations. Given the significant divergences on threat perceptions and underlying values, neither policy-makers nor defence industry leaders in Sweden or Finland are likely to pursue much deeper cooperation with Ankara on defence or national security in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, being one of the militarily most capable NATO allies, Turkey is seen as "too important to lose" in the current unstable European security context, and there are at least some potential areas of shared interest.

This report was written in 2024 and 2025, with much of the research conducted around one year after the NATO accession negotiations between Turkey, Sweden, and Finland had been concluded (with the negotiations between Sweden and Turkey continuing after Finland's NATO accession). The report is based on interviews with foreign and security policy elites in the two countries, primary data gathered from government sources, government planning documents and legislation, as well as secondary sources. Interviewees include senior diplomats and civil servants at the foreign ministries, defence ministries, and in the armed forces, as well as experts and defence industry professionals. The bulk of the interviews were conducted before the US elections in November 2024, with some follow-up interviews in the early weeks of the new administration of Donald J. Trump. Given the major shakeup of the European security landscape that the Trump administration's statements and policies during the first few months in office have given rise to, we reached out once more to some of our interviewees prior to publication and added a section in our conclusion, where we consider what these developments mean for Turkey and its European partners.

The report begins with an overview of Swedish and Finnish perspectives on current threats and developments concerning security on the European continent. Section 2 starts with an account of bilateral ties and cooperation on security and military matters before the NATO accession process, followed by a description of the changes that followed as a result of that process. The report then moves to the perceptions of Turkey's role in the European security architecture among Finnish and Swedish foreign policy professionals, followed by views among the general public and the business community.

2.

# Re-organizing European Security Amidst Geopolitical Tensions

Finland and Sweden have a common history that binds them together, and they cooperate more closely with each other on defence matters than with any other country. As this section shows, there is a high degree of alignment between Finland and Sweden when it comes to threat perceptions and preferences regarding the development of European and global security institutions and increased operational capabilities in Europe. There is some divergence when it comes to joint European efforts on arms production, but the differences should not be exaggerated.

2.1

## Risk Assessments and Threat Perceptions

Based on Swedish and Finnish official national security documents and our interviews, it is clear that the two governments view Russian aggression as the most acute threat to European security for the foreseeable future. Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 was a watershed moment for both countries. However, although 2022 was a transformative year for Sweden and Finland, concerns over a steadily deteriorating security environment in the Nordic-Baltic region date back to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and Russia's increasingly aggressive and reckless behaviour also towards its north-western neighbours. Since 2022, supporting Ukraine in its fight against unjustified Russian aggression is a high priority for both countries.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Finland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy 35* (Helsinki, 20 June 2024): 23, [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/165723/VN\\_2024\\_35.pdf](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/165723/VN_2024_35.pdf) (accessed 8 January 2025); Government of Sweden, *Nationell säkerhetsstrategi, Regeringens skrivelse*

Russia is seen as posing both a systemic and an immediate threat. Foreign and security policy professionals in Finland and Sweden see a direct military threat due to the risk of horizontal escalation beyond Ukraine and an extension of the war that would involve more European countries in the future.<sup>2</sup> Finland, with its 1,340 km long border with Russia, is particularly concerned about said possibility.<sup>3</sup>

Russia plays a role in some, but not all of, the broader threat assessments in the two Nordic countries. In Finland, Russia's future power constellation and a possible post-war, post-Putin scenario is a source of concern, especially if it results in similarly chaotic domestic circumstances as in the 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>4</sup> Finnish officials and experts see climate change and uncontrolled migration and its instrumentalization<sup>5</sup> – as well as energy and economic security and how these fields can potentially be weaponized – as pacing threats.<sup>6</sup> The abovementioned threats are connected and can have mutually accelerating effects: The return of large-scale war is detrimental to the climate and the environment, and climate-induced environmental disasters can, in turn, trigger mass migration.<sup>7</sup> Further destabilization in the Middle East will also have negative knock-on effects on wider European – and therefore also on Finnish – security.<sup>8</sup> The overall polarization trend in Western societies, from which Finland is not exempt, is seen as a prominent domestic threat. Strong polarization could have the potential to weaken the process of creating a national consensus on the principles of national defence in Finland, where especially the threat assessment is widely shared across society.

Sweden emphasizes the external threat from authoritarian regimes attempting to reformulate global norms and undermine or reshape the rules-based world order.<sup>9</sup> The increasing tendency for China to partner with Russia and provide indirect support for its war in Ukraine – along with China's own geopolitical ambitions, the modernization of the Chinese armed forces and nuclear arsenal, and its turn towards greater totalitarianism domestically – are seen as threats to not just the stability in the Asia-Pacific region, but also to global security, with consequences for Sweden.<sup>10</sup> The Swedish national security strategy for 2023/25 notes that China's capabilities in the cyber domain and intelligence activities are aimed directly at Sweden, as well as hybrid threats emanating from autocratic regimes such as Russia, China, and Iran

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2023/24:163 [National Security Strategy, Government Letter 2023/24:163] (Stockholm, 04 July 2024a): 20, <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/125593e4516a49ce9b9ab942f49cca8d/232416300webb.pdf> (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>3</sup> Interviews FI001, FI003, FI004, and FI006.

<sup>4</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews FI001, FI003, FI004, and FI006.

<sup>6</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>7</sup> Interviews FI003 and FI004.

<sup>8</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>9</sup> Government of Sweden, 2024a: 10;  
Interview SE003.

<sup>10</sup> Government of Sweden, 2024a: 11–12, 20.

against Swedish citizens, institutions, and infrastructure.<sup>11</sup> The document notes climate change and rapid technological developments (including AI) among the non-actor-based external threats.<sup>12</sup> The strategy also describes a complex of “internal” threats, such as violent extremism and terrorism as well as insecurity due to organized crime and a lack of societal cohesion. For Swedish decision-makers, the internal and external threats are connected, in part through migration and the internationalization of Swedish society, but also because external actors deliberately exploit domestic vulnerabilities.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2

# Institutional Pillars

Due to the vulnerabilities of small countries like Finland and Sweden and the natural limits to their military power, the rules-based international order is an important guarantor of their security and sovereignty. Governments in both countries are deeply invested in maintaining the institutional framework, comprised of European and global multilateral organizations such as NATO, the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations, as well as the international legal framework and the international norms that undergird these.

A senior Swedish diplomat working on national security distinguished between the European security *order* and the security *architecture*. The *order* is

a system of norms, international law, the UN Charter, the OSCE and norms agreed upon at the Helsinki Security Conference in 1975 and in Paris in 1990. It is a legal order and a political commitment. This stands, but Russia and Belarus are violating it and thereby threatening it.<sup>14</sup>

The European security *architecture*, in turn, consists of practical agreements and organizations – from disarmament to alliances – of which the most important building block is NATO. NATO has been strengthened with the memberships of Sweden and Finland, but several international arms control regimes that create transparency have been abandoned by one or several of the parties, which reduces security in Europe and the world.<sup>15</sup> When prompted, senior Swedish diplomats expressed concern that the actions of Trump might further undermine this order, but

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid: 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: 14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid: 13.

<sup>14</sup> Interview SE006.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



they were reluctant to draw early conclusions on this.<sup>16</sup> So far, both Finnish and Swedish government officials have remained very cautious in their statements regarding the Trump administration, despite a lively public debate in both countries on the reliability of the US.

Future institutional development and priorities are somewhat unclear from the point of view of Finnish officials. On the one hand, uncertainty about NATO's future due to the volatility of American domestic politics had been expressed already before Trump was re-elected as US president, and therefore the need to invest in Europe's own defence capability was recognized. Ideally, according to our interviewees, a new division of labour would emerge in the transatlantic Alliance, with European allies taking significantly more responsibility for their continent, thereby enabling the US to focus more on the Indo-Pacific. The US would nevertheless remain present in Europe and continue to be the last instance guarantor of the transatlantic Alliance, as it was considered unlikely that European countries could substitute for all American-provided enablers.<sup>17</sup>

On the other hand, Finnish officials believe that the creation of duplicate structures should be avoided, not least because European countries do not have enough troops and equipment to create an independent EU structure next to NATO. Any competition between the EU and NATO should be avoided and complementarity enhanced: NATO should be responsible for hard (military) security, whereas the EU has the resources to support research and development, as well as procurement. The EU also has a broader toolbox of softer forms of influence, such as political and trade-related pressure.<sup>18</sup> NATO is responsible for defence planning in Europe, which has proceeded into the implementation phase. The EU could optimally support the implementation of NATO's regional plans in Europe on the civilian side, with regard to resilience and preparedness questions.<sup>19</sup> The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) should be strengthened, while at the same time being realistic about its limits: Defence remains a national competence, as nation states are the main point of reference for their citizens and provide a source of willingness to defend, which does not exist in terms of political identity on the EU level.<sup>20</sup>

Swedish officials' views of the European security architecture do not significantly differ from those of the Finns. They express a desire to reinforce the framework, which includes an important role for multilateral organizations such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, of which both Finland and Sweden are members.<sup>21</sup> However, there is also a realization that the OSCE is practically paralyzed in the wake of Russia's

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<sup>16</sup> Interview SE001, SE003, SE004, and SE006.

<sup>17</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>18</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>19</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>20</sup> Interview FI004.

<sup>21</sup> Interview SE004 and SE003.

war against Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Both official strategy documents and our interviewees are clear that the Swedish government now sees NATO as the most important guarantor of European and transatlantic security, while the EU is the most important arena for Swedish foreign policy. The most urgent task for Sweden as a new member is to become fully integrated into the political, civilian, and military dimensions of NATO.<sup>23</sup> Sweden acknowledges that Europe must take greater responsibility for its own security, but it believes that this should be done in a manner that strengthens the transatlantic link and does not infringe on the competences of member states. This includes cooperation between defence industries in different European countries and on technology.<sup>24</sup> At the time, our interviewees did not see European strategic autonomy on defence as either realistic or something to be desired, but this assessment is likely in flux as a result of Trump's hostile policies.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.3

## Operational Capabilities and Relations with Non-EU Countries

The perception of the governments in the two Nordic countries is that the post-Cold War era of “eternal peace” is clearly over and both are reconstituting their military capabilities accordingly. The required changes are greater in Sweden due to a radical post-Cold War scaling-down of military capability. Sweden is now making significant investments in its armed forces and into supporting Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression. Defence spending in Sweden doubled between 2020 and 2024, and the military is scheduled to receive an additional €15 billion until 2030, with additional increases expected down the line. Sweden and Finland are among the top donors of military aid to Ukraine per capita (having surpassed 1 per cent of their gross domestic products) and in absolute terms, and both have also made long-term investments into Ukraine's defence industry.

When it comes to defence policy and its preconditions, Sweden is returning to an emphasis on territorial defence as opposed to the focus on out-of-area operations during the post-Cold War era of crisis management, when the Swedish armed forces were geared towards participation in international interventions in varied multilateral institutional settings. Finland, on the other hand, always kept the emphasis on territorial defence, and therefore still has a broad-based conscription system in place, similar to Turkey's. A consensus on the need for a robust national capability forms the

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<sup>22</sup> Interview SE003.

<sup>23</sup> Interview SE003 and SE006;

Government of Sweden, 2024a: 17, 20.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid: 18–19.

<sup>25</sup> Interview SE006.

basis of the defence system in Finland and explains the willingness to defend the country as well as high levels of popular support for general conscription.<sup>26</sup> Sweden, on the other hand, reintroduced conscription in 2017 but – with approximately 7,000–8,000 conscripts annually – is still far behind Finland's 23,000.

The war in Ukraine has laid bare European vulnerabilities in the defence materiel sector and overall warfighting preparedness.<sup>27</sup> Western European militaries' equipment and procurement have, in the last decades, been limited to professional soldiers' tasks in overseas deployments and did not address territorial defence needs. As a result, Europe currently lacks both stockpiles and production capacity. From a Finnish point of view, the ramping up of industrial capacity has been too slow. Only after more than two years of high-intensity war in Ukraine did European companies manage to increase production of, for instance, heavy artillery ammunition, which has proven crucial in Ukraine. At the same time, European countries have not been able to backfill their stockpiles to compensate for the military aid given to Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> As is pointed out in one interview, a significant hampering factor for European defence industries is the number of different versions of the same weapons systems, and the myriads of national variations, even for systems from the same company.<sup>29</sup> European defence industries therefore cannot produce at a scale that would bring cost benefits. Despite sufficient financial resources, European countries buy American equipment due to the inefficiency and uncompetitive nature of the European defence industrial base.<sup>30</sup> European countries would urgently need to standardize their equipment – at least among countries that work closely together – but that would mean giving up some national competences or industry branches, which many countries are reluctant to do.<sup>31</sup>

Swedish officials' perspectives on European defence production are similar to those of their Finnish counterparts. Swedish policy-makers identify an urgent need to ramp up arms production in Europe, reduce redundancies, and set aside protectionist concerns that might have hampered such efforts in the past. New European efforts need to override concerns stemming from national protectionism clashing with realities concerning the multinational ownership structures of many firms in the sector. The Swedish government's 2024/25 Defence Proposition pledges active Swedish participation in the EU's new instruments to develop the European defence industry,

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<sup>26</sup> In an annual poll, the percentage of willingness among interviewees to defend the country was 78 per cent in 2024, with a small decrease compared to the all-time high of 83 per cent in 2022. 80 per cent of respondents support the current conscription model, which is obligatory for male citizens and voluntary for female citizens, while 28 per cent support a gender-neutral conscription. Ministry of Defence of Finland, *Finns' opinions on foreign and security policy, national defence and security*, Bulletins and Reports 6 (Helsinki: Advisory Board for Defence Information [MTS], December 2024): 18, 24, <http://bit.ly/4oPTYXV> (accessed 14 January 2025).

<sup>27</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>28</sup> Interviews FI001 and FI003.

<sup>29</sup> Interview FI003 and FI006.

<sup>30</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews FI003, FI006, and SE004.

both for national security reasons and to ensure that the Swedish defence industry gains full access to such programmes and efforts.<sup>32</sup>

However, Sweden has some caveats. First, while recognizing a need to reduce redundancy in the production of weapons systems, Sweden has an interest in preventing too much consolidation. The many unique Swedish platforms, such as the fighter aircraft JAS Gripen, the CV90 armoured combat vehicle, and the Archer Artillery System, could be threatened by efforts to eliminate redundancy. Second, several of the largest Swedish manufacturers have joint ownership with partners in non-EU countries such as Norway, the United Kingdom, and the US.<sup>33</sup> From the Swedish point of view, any EU investment should be flexible enough to accommodate investments into and purchases from companies that are not fully owned by companies based in the EU. This is less of a concern in the case of Norwegian partnerships, as the country's membership in the European Economic Area means that it would have access to, for example, investments using the EU's Structural Funds. It is a concern in the case of the UK, however, and Sweden is therefore pushing to ensure that the UK is included in any future EU defence investment programmes.<sup>34</sup>

The Swedish government places a priority on Nordic defence cooperation. However, the strength of the Swedish defence industry has compelled Finland and Norway to team up to increase their own competitiveness. Finland and Norway therefore co-own Finland's largest defence company, Patria, and the aerospace and defence company Nammo, which has ammunition production sites in Finland, Sweden, and Norway.<sup>35</sup> The Nordic countries have addressed the high demand for ammunition by Ukraine and the lack of stockpiles in Europe with increased defence industrial cooperation using funding from the EU's "ASAP" programme (Act in Support of Ammunition Production).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Government of Sweden, *Regeringens proposition 2024/25:34, Totalförsvaret 2025–2030 [Government Bill 2024/25:34, Total Defence 2025–2030]* (Stockholm, 14 October 2024b) <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/5c98b885c2cc40d58aa3693d34d915d3/totalforsvaret-20252030-prop.-20242534.pdf> (accessed 14 January 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Interview SE004.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews SE004 and SE005;  
Government of Sweden, 2024a: 18–19.

<sup>35</sup> Patria Group, *About Us*, <https://www.patriagroup.com/about-us/>;  
Nammo, *About Us*, <https://www.nammo.com/about-us/> (both accessed 09 January 2025).

<sup>36</sup> Government of Finland, "Finland Achieves Its EU Ammunition Funding Goal", Press Release (Helsinki, 15 March 2024), <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/finland-achieves-its-eu-ammunition-funding-goal> (accessed 09 January 2025);  
Government of Sweden Ministry of Defence, "EU Financial Support for Increased Ammunition Production in Sweden", Press Release (Stockholm, 19 March 2024), <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2024/03/eu-financial-support-for-increased-ammunition-production-in-sweden/> (accessed 09 January 2025).

3.

# Security and Defence Relations with Turkey

Building on the background outlined in the first section, this second section delves into the prevailing perceptions within the foreign policy and security circles in Finland and Sweden regarding Turkey amidst a shifting European security landscape. It assesses the evolution of a security partnership with Turkey, focusing on areas of convergence and divergence regarding threat perceptions, defence, and operational capabilities. As such, it elaborates on the perceived mid-to-long-term opportunities and risks associated with a deepened security partnership with Ankara. In addressing these topics, this section first outlines the two countries' recent history of security and defence cooperation with Turkey. Then it discusses the perceptions of Turkey's role in European security held by various actors, from government officials to the broader public.

## 3.1

### Pre-NATO Bilateral Cooperation

Overall, Finland has had good and fairly close relations with Turkey. Regular consultations between the two countries take place both on the technical and political levels. Counterterrorism is one important topic of longstanding bilateral police and intelligence cooperation.<sup>37</sup> The positive nature of the relations was considered beneficial in the NATO accession process. Since Finland became a NATO member, Turkey has also expressed interest in closer military cooperation, which is currently still in the early stages.<sup>38</sup> However, bilateral military cooperation is somewhat hampered by the fact that Finland and Turkey do not have a shared geography, and their threat perceptions do not always align. Terrorism (particularly related to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK) constitutes the highest security priority for Turkey. Yet, as it is pointed out in one interview, Russia is viewed with mistrust in Ankara, too. Particularly in Syria, but also elsewhere, Turkey's relations with Russia are

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<sup>37</sup> Interviews FI001, FI003, and FI006.

<sup>38</sup> Interview FI006.

competitive or even conflictual. Turkey has also had direct military experience with Russian interference in its intervention in Syria.<sup>39</sup>

Swedish-Turkish bilateral relations have also, on the whole, been good. Like Finland, the Swedish government was a strong supporter of Turkey's quest for EU accession. However, the presence of influential Kurdish and Assyrian diasporas in Sweden as well as a tradition of internationalism focused on solidarity, human rights, and, in recent years, gender issues in Swedish foreign policy, have at times put Sweden on a collision course with Ankara, as Turkey has gone through democratic decline and enacted increasingly conservative policies.<sup>40</sup> Two diplomatic incidents stand out as examples of recent complications. During the tenure of Margot Wallström, the Social Democratic Minister for Foreign Affairs between 2014 and 2019, the Swedish foreign ministry tried to arrange a visit to Ankara. Yet, plans were scuttled in part due to a minor diplomatic spat in 2016 after Wallström criticized on Twitter a controversial Turkish bill concerning sexual relations with minors. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Şimşek retorted on Twitter, and the Swedish chargé d'affaires in Ankara was called up to the foreign ministry.<sup>41</sup> When Wallström's successor, Ann Linde (also a Social Democrat), was finally able to conduct the long-awaited trip to Ankara in 2020, it, too, resulted in a public spat between her and her Turkish counterpart, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. At a joint press conference following their meeting, Linde criticized the Turkish government for restricting freedom of speech and urged Ankara to withdraw Turkish troops from northern Syria, leading to a harsh rebuke from her host.<sup>42</sup>

When it comes to military cooperation between Sweden and Turkey, there has been relatively little substance in a bilateral format.<sup>43</sup> Cooperation has instead mostly taken place in the context of international peacekeeping missions and within the framework of multilateral organizations that the two are members of, including the UN, the OSCE, and (to the extent that it deals with security and defence matters) the Council of Europe. One of the few examples of bilateral cooperation is the Turkish-Swedish framework agreement on cooperation around military training, technique, and science that was signed in 2012 and entered into force in 2015.<sup>44</sup> Some areas it covers

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<sup>39</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>40</sup> For a treatment of the Turkish-origin diasporas in Sweden: Bahar Baser and Paul T. Levin, *Migration from Turkey to Sweden: Integration, Belonging and Transnational Community*, Library of Modern Turkey (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017); One Swedish prime minister once described the country as a "humanitarian superpower"; Jon Pierre, "Introduction: The Decline of Swedish Exceptionalism?", in *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, ed. Jon Pierre (Oxford, 2015): 1–16.

<sup>41</sup> "Turkiet kräver svar efter Wallströms kritik" [Turkey demands an answer after criticism by Wallström], *Aftonbladet* (online), 16 August 2016, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/MgmkeB/turkiet-kraver-svar-efter-wallstroms-kritik> (accessed 04 October 2024).

<sup>42</sup> "Turkish, Swedish Ministers Trade Swipes in Tense Meeting", *AP News* (online), 13 October 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-mevlut-cavusoglu-sweden-stockholm-greece-325b416f2b735eb69658dfa671b0d941> (accessed 04 October 2024).

<sup>43</sup> Interview SE002.

<sup>44</sup> The document is called "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Cooperation in Military Fields of Training, Technique, and Science";



are: the exchange of experience and information; military-technical cooperation; education and training; observers at exercises; logistics and supplies; military medicine; research and development; the defence industry; and other mutually agreed upon areas. The agreement has allowed for regular exchanges, such as reciprocal participation in certain training programmes, but its importance should not be exaggerated. There have also been bilateral meetings at the staff level between the armed forces of the two countries since 2006. At these meetings, both countries' representatives present their perspective on the security situation in their respective neighbourhoods, discuss exercises in which both will participate, and exchange information. The staff talks were suspended during the pandemic, and the last one was held in March 2022, a month before the impasse over Swedish and Finnish accession into NATO began. There were no meetings in this format in 2023 due to the "somewhat messy nature of the relationship", as an interviewee put it, during the NATO negotiations.<sup>45</sup>

Arms exports from Sweden to Turkey have historically been limited. The total value of exports of military equipment between 2009 and 2023 was ca SEK 578 million in nominal figures (ca €50 million at today's exchange rate). In 2019, following the third Turkish incursion into northern Syria, Sweden promoted an EU-wide ban on arms sales to Turkey. When that effort failed, the Swedish export control agency for strategic products, the Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), imposed a moratorium on Swedish military exports to Turkey, withdrawing existing licences.<sup>46</sup> Finland implemented a similar moratorium on Turkey in October 2019 by not granting any new export licences.<sup>47</sup> Prior to 2019, the volume of actual exports from Sweden to Turkey varied widely, from SEK 0.2 million (about €20,000) in 2010 to f298 million (ca €29 million) in 2018. The spike in 2018 exports can be traced back to deals made earlier – as the highest value of licences approved came in 2016 (SEK 217 million, or ca €22 million) – and possibly also reflect a realization in the business community that opportunities for further exports would be limited in the future, given that the Turkish government's repeated unilateral military incursions into northern Syria were being met with increasingly harsh criticism by Swedish politicians. Figure 1

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Interview SE002.

<sup>45</sup> Interview SE002.

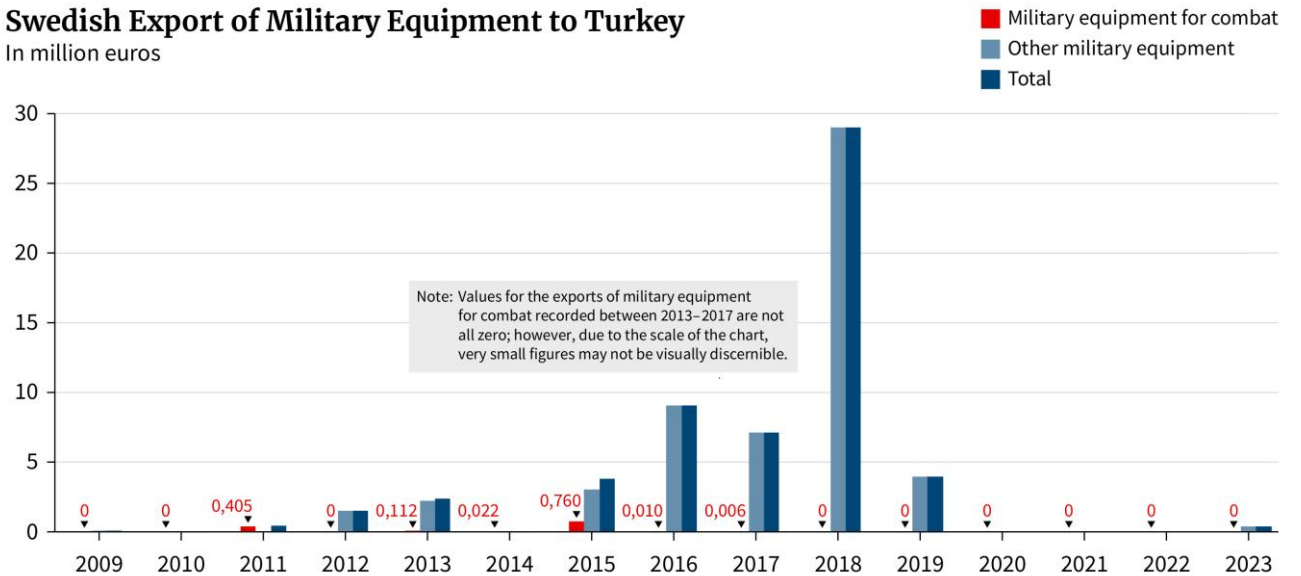
<sup>46</sup> There was technically no Swedish arms embargo on Turkey, but the ISP recalled all export licences in 2019 with reference to the situation in northern Syria. In fact, no arms materiel exports had been approved since 2017, and no new licences were granted until 2023; (while the ISP did not deny any licences either, the absence of applications during the period was arguably due to the signals from the ISP and the government that no such applications would be approved), Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), *Angående svensk krigsmaterielexport till Turkiet* [About Swedish military material exports to Turkey] (Solna, 21 December 2022), <https://isp.se/nyheter/angaende-svensk-krigsmaterielexport-till-turkiet/> (accessed 31 January 2025).

<sup>47</sup> "Suomi ei antanut uutta lupaa suojausteräksen vientiin tulevalle Nato-kumppanille – kaksi asevientilupaa Turkkiin on vielä voimassa" [Finland did not give permission to export protective steel to future NATO partner – two export licences are still in effect], *Yle* (online), 23 May 2022, <https://yle.fi/a/3-12457697> (accessed 24 January 2025).

shows the significant year-on-year variations as well as the effect of the moratorium on new licences that began in 2019.<sup>48</sup>

Figure 1<sup>49</sup>

Swedish Export of Military Equipment to Turkey  
In million euros



Source: Government Offices of Sweden, Government Communication on Strategic Export Controls

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Almost all (95 per cent) Swedish exports to Turkey prior to 2018 fall in the category of “other military equipment”, as distinct from “military equipment for combat” (MEC). 2017 was the last year that any Swedish licences for the export of MEC to Turkey were approved. It is difficult to obtain information about specific weapons systems exported, but the general categories and years in which exports in each category took place are listed in Table 2.

<sup>48</sup> Data on Swedish arms exports is available on the Swedish government website, with links to annual reports: Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), *Regeringens årliga skrivelse om strategisk exportkontroll* [Government's annual letter on strategic export controls] (Solna, 19 April 2017), <https://isp.se/om-isp/publikationer/regeringens-arliga-skrivelse/> (accessed 31 January 2025). Figures presented here do not include dual-use products, which are reported separately in the government's figures.

<sup>49</sup> Government of Sweden, *Legal Documents* (Stockholm), <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/?page=1> (accessed 31 January 2025); Data gathered from Government of Sweden's Communications on Strategic Export Controls – Military Equipment and Dual-Use Items between 2009 and 2023: *Regeringens skrivelse 2009/10:114, Strategisk exportkontroll 2009 – krigsmateriel och produkter med dubbla användningsområden* [Strategic export control 2009 – military materiel and products with dual-use application]; *Skr. 2011/12:114*, and the same reports the following years: *Skr. 2010/11:114*; *Skr. 2011/12:114*; *Skr. 2012/13:114*; *Skr. 2013/14:114*; *Skr. 2014/15:114*; *Skr. 2015/16:114*; *Skr. 2016/17:114*; *Skr. 2017/18:114*; *Skr. 2018/19:114*; *Skr. 2019/20:114*; *Skr. 2020/21:114*; *Skr. 2021/22:114*; *Skr. 2022/23:114*; *Skr. 2023/24:114*.



**Table 1: Categories of military equipment exported from Sweden to Turkey between 2009 and 2023**

Category of equipment	Years of export
Armour or protective equipment	2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2023
Energetic material (including explosives)	2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017
Technology	2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018
Software	2012, 2013, 2015
Ground vehicles and related equipment	2011, 2012
Fire control and related alerting and warning equipment	2015, 2019
Electronic equipment	2018
Specialized equipment for training (such as simulators and scenarios)	2019
Miscellaneous equipment, materials, and “libraries”	2014

Source: Authors

Finnish arms exports to Turkey grew significantly prior to the halting of new export licences in 2019. From 2014 to 2018, Turkey grew from a share of 3.3 per cent of Finland’s total arms exports to 13.2 per cent, reaching a volume of €17 million and making Turkey the largest destination of arms exports licences in 2018. 95 per cent of Finland’s exports to Turkey were in the category of protective equipment and material, with protective steel comprising the majority of exports.<sup>50</sup> The reason for Finland’s pivot towards Turkey and the Middle East and Africa in general in the 2010s was the overall decrease in arms imports in most European countries during the so-called post-Cold War peace dividend.<sup>51</sup> In 2023, the Ministry of Defence approved a new export licence to Turkey, again for protective steel.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Veli-Pekka Hämäläinen and Juha Rissanen, “Tällaista on Suomen asevientit Turkkiin – luvut kovassa kasvussa, vihreää valoa muun muassa ammusten viennille Turkin erikoisjoukoille” [This is what Finnish arms exports to Turkey look like – figures on the rise, green light for the sale of ammunition to Turkish special forces, among others], *Yle* (online), 10 October 2019, <https://yle.fi/a/3-11013654> (accessed 24 January 2025).

<sup>51</sup> “Suomen asevientit kääntyi: Aiemmin EU-maat, nyt erityisesti Turkki” [Finland’s arms exports turned around: previously EU countries, now especially Turkey], *Ilta-Sanomat* (online), 23 October 2016, <https://www.is.fi/taloussanomat/art-2000001936359.html> (accessed 27 March 2025).

<sup>52</sup> “Suomi on myöntänyt uuden puolustustarvikkeiden vientiluvan Turkkiin – Li Andersson arvostelee päätöstä” [Finland has granted a new export licence for defence equipment to Turkey – Li Andersson criticises the decision], *MTV Uutiset/STT* (online), 25 January 2023, <https://www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/suomi-on-myontanyt-uuden-puolustustarvikkeiden-vientiluvan-turkkiin/8619192> (accessed 24 January 2025).

## 3.2

# The NATO Accession Process

The decisions by Sweden and Finland to seek full membership in NATO were game changers in their relations with Turkey, and the change was most dramatic when it came to Swedish–Turkish relations. After his announcement on 13 May 2022 that he would not quickly approve the Swedish and Finnish NATO applications, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan used the veto right in NATO to leverage changes in Finnish and Swedish policies on a number of issues. Ankara asked for a resumption of arms exports and a realignment on policy concerning groups that Ankara views as terrorists: most importantly the Kurdish guerrillas, the PKK, but also the Gülen movement, a religious sect Erdoğan had previously been allied with, but which the Turkish government now labels “the Fetullahist Terror Organization” or “FETÖ”. The PKK has long been on terrorist watchlists in the EU, Finland, and Sweden, whereas “FETÖ” has not.<sup>53</sup>

The NATO negotiations resulted in a number of new commitments on the part of Finland and Sweden, primarily enshrined in two agreements: The “Trilateral Memorandum between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden”, signed on 28 June 2022, and the press statement following the meeting in Vilnius between the Swedish prime minister, the president of Turkey, and the NATO Secretary General on 10 July 2023.<sup>54</sup> In the Trilateral Memorandum, Sweden and Finland vowed to, among other things, “extend their full support to Türkiye against threats to its national security” and to “not provide support to” the Kurdish militant group the People’s Protection Units / Democratic Union Party (YPG/PYD) that Turkey considers to be an extension of the PKK or to “the organisation described as FETÖ in Türkiye”. The two Nordic governments outlined other steps in the fight against terrorism that had been taken, or were being undertaken, and promised to “address Türkiye’s pending deportation or extradition requests of terror suspects expeditiously and thoroughly”. The Trilateral Memorandum furthermore established “a joint, structured dialogue and cooperation mechanism at all levels of government, to enhance cooperation on counterterrorism, organized crime, and other common challenges as they so decide”. All in all, Finland and Sweden managed to negotiate the language in a way that remained fairly vague on the concrete details of any new commitments.

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<sup>53</sup> In fact, Sweden may have been the first European country to place the PKK on its terror watch list, following two alleged assassinations of PKK defectors in Sweden in the mid-1980s.

<sup>54</sup> NATO, *Trilateral Memorandum* (between Türkiye, Finland, and Sweden) (Madrid, 28 June 2022), [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220628-trilat-memo.pdf) (accessed 02 October 2024); NATO, “Press Statement Following the Meeting Between Türkiye, Sweden, and the NATO Secretary General”, Press release (Vilnius, 10 July 2023), [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_217147.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_217147.htm) (accessed 02 October 2024).

Both the YPG/PYD and Gülen movement have been thorny issues in Turkey's relations with its Western allies. Because of the perceived lack of solidarity by the EU and the US during the 2016 attempted coup – for which Ankara holds the Gülenists responsible – and the US partnership with the YPG/PYD in northern Syria against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that began to take root in 2014, Ankara believes it can no longer fully trust its Western partners. Turkey has long attempted to get greater recognition within NATO for its view of terrorism, particularly concerning the YPG/PYD, as one of the main security threats to the Alliance.<sup>55</sup> The Trilateral Memorandum thus represented a significant diplomatic gain for Ankara in terms of getting two prospective NATO members to align more closely to its view of the YPG/PYD as a national security threat, at least on paper. Importantly, Turkey was also able to leverage Finland's and Sweden's membership applications in the negotiation on NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, and to ensure that terrorism was included prominently in the threat description right after the threat posed by Russia.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from assurances regarding counterterrorism, Finland and Sweden agreed to resume arms exports to Turkey. During the early phase of the negotiations over Sweden's NATO accession, the Swedish government announced that membership in the alliance would change the preconditions for Swedish weapons exports. The Trilateral Memorandum affirmed that there were no national arms embargoes against Turkey in Finland or Sweden. Although technically true that there never were any formal arms embargoes, the NATO process did change policy. After several years of not approving any new licences for arms exports to Turkey, the ISP approved two export licences for follow-on deliveries of non-lethal defence materiel in 2022 (though no actual exports occurred during the year).<sup>57</sup> In 2023, the ISP approved an additional four licences for exports amounting to SEK 5 million (ca €430,000), and the actual exports totalled SEK 4.3 million, or ca €378,000 that year. To our knowledge, there has been no export of arms materiel going in the other direction, from Turkey to Sweden.

Sweden and Finland also agreed to support the fullest possible involvement of Turkey into European and EU security institutions such as the CSDP and the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) project on military mobility. In the words of a senior Swedish diplomat, “we are all for it.” This was a low-hanging fruit, given that the prospect for cooperation is hampered by the familiar stumbling blocks stemming

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<sup>55</sup> Toni Alaranta, *NATO's Nordic Enlargement and Turkey's Reservations: Trilateral Memorandum of Understanding in the Context of Turkey's Wider Strategic Interests*, FIIA Briefing Paper 349 (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs [FIIA], September 2022), <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/natos-nordic-enlargement-and-turkeys-reservations> (accessed 05 October 2024).

<sup>56</sup> NATO, *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept* (Brussels, 2022): 4, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf) (accessed 8 January 2025).

<sup>57</sup> Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), “Den svenska exporten av krigsmateriel 2022” [Swedish exports of military equipment in 2022], Press release (Solna, 17 March 2023), [https://isp.se/media/1947/20230317\\_pressmeddelandev4\\_isp.pdf](https://isp.se/media/1947/20230317_pressmeddelandev4_isp.pdf) (accessed 31 January 2025).

from the lack of a resolution to the conflict on Cyprus, which is beyond Finland and Sweden's power to resolve.<sup>58</sup> Finland, knowing that Turkey's issues were more with Sweden, emphasized already existing legislation and rule of law limitations in, for example, the extradition demands. Sweden, eager to resolve the stalemate, was willing to offer more. Although there were no extraditions of PKK suspects from Sweden, police did take action to restrict fundraising and other activities of PKK-aligned organizations in Sweden, and the government rushed an already planned legislative package that sharpened anti-terror laws.<sup>59</sup>

During the negotiations, a number of formats for trilateral and bilateral dialogue were set up, although it is somewhat unclear how they relate to one another and whether they have been continued after the two Nordic countries' accession. The Trilateral Memorandum set up a Permanent Joint Mechanism (PJM) for the implementation of the steps in the agreement. So far, there have been six meetings under this trilateral format.<sup>60</sup> It is unclear when/if additional meetings will take place. The Turkish side appears intent on this, whereas the Swedish side prefers bilateral discussions moving forward.<sup>61</sup> This mechanism includes participation of "experts from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior and Justice, as well as Intelligence Services and Security Institutions".

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<sup>58</sup> Interview SE004.

<sup>59</sup> Paul T. Levin, *The Turkish Veto: Why Erdogan Is Blocking Finland and Sweden's Path to NATO*, FPRI Analysis (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2023), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/the-turkish-veto-why-erdogan-is-blocking-finland-and-swedens-path-to-nato/> (accessed 14 January 2025).

<sup>60</sup> The Permanent Joint Mechanism (PJM) has met in Vantaa, Finland (26 August 2022), "Finland, Sweden, Turkey meet over NATO accession bids," *Daily Finland* (online) 27 August 2025 <https://www.dailyfinland.fi/national/28698/Finland-Sweden-Turkey-meet-over-NATO-accession-bids> (accessed 19 July 2025); Stockholm (25 November 2022), "Meeting of the permanent joint mechanism – Türkiye, Finland and Sweden" Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (online) 25 November 2022, <https://www.government.se/articles/2022/11/meeting-of-the-permanent-joint-mechanism--turkiye-finland-and-sweden/> (accessed 19 July 2025); Brussels (09 March 2023), "The Permanent Joint mechanism between Finland, Sweden and Türkiye met in Brussels," Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, (online) 9 March 2023, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/the-permanent-joint-mechanism-between-finland-sweden-and-turkiye-met-in-brussels>, (accessed 19 July 2025); Ankara (14 June 2023), "Permanent Joint Mechanism between Finland, Sweden and Türkiye meet in Ankara," Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (online) 14 July 2025, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/permanent-joint-mechanism-between-finland-sweden-and-turkiye-meet-in-ankara>, (accessed 19 July 2025); Brussels (06 July 2023), No: 168, 6 July 2023, Press Release Regarding the Permanent Joint Mechanism Meeting," Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs (online) 6 July 2023, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no\\_-168\\_-daimi-ortak-mekanizma-toplantisi-hk.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-168_-daimi-ortak-mekanizma-toplantisi-hk.en.mfa), (accessed 19 July 2025); and Helsinki (02 May 2024), "6th meeting of the Permanent Joint Mechanism between Türkiye, Finland and Sweden held in Helsinki," Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, (online) 2 May 2024, <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/6th-meeting-of-the-permanent-joint-mechanism-between-turkiye-finland-and-sweden-held-in-helsinki>, (accessed 19 July 2025).

<sup>61</sup> Follow-up to interview SE001. The Turkish Directorate of Communications writes on its website that a seventh meeting of the PJM is to be held in Stockholm, but according to our Swedish sources, the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs does not seem to be planning such a meeting.

In addition to the PJM, the Trilateral Memorandum also stated that the three parties would:

Establish a joint, structured dialogue and cooperation mechanism at all levels of government, including between law enforcement and intelligence agencies, to enhance cooperation on counter-terrorism, organized crime and other common challenges as they so decide.

Publicly available information about these meetings is limited, except for the fact that they have taken place. According to our interviews at the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this description was more of a codification of a range of already existing channels of communication and a signal of their importance than the establishment of a new, centrally coordinated cooperation mechanism. The Swedish negotiators were eager to include the mention of organized crime among the common challenges to be dealt with. Given the presence of Swedish crime syndicates in Turkey – where some gang leaders have acquired Turkish citizenship, and from where they allegedly order assassinations and control their operations in Sweden – Swedish police and prosecutors have long sought better cooperation with Turkish authorities. They saw the NATO negotiations as an opportunity to introduce the demands of Sweden and achieve mutually beneficial cooperation between law enforcement on both terrorism and organized crime.<sup>62</sup>

In the days leading up to the 2023 NATO summit in Vilnius, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg led the final bilateral negotiations between Sweden and Turkey, which concluded successfully with a joint statement before the press on 10 July in which the Turkish president committed to put the Swedish accession request before the Turkish parliament. The joint statement briefly listed Sweden's efforts to implement the Madrid Memorandum, including new anti-terror laws and constitutional changes, and then established a new Bilateral Security Compact between Turkey and Sweden. The first meeting of this Compact took place in Ankara on 21 January 2025, with the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister of Justice present along with the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs. As agreed in Vilnius, the Swedish side presented a "roadmap" for its continued fight against terrorism during the meeting. Judging from the press conference after the meeting, the Swedish side pressed the need for cooperation on organized crime, whereas the Turkish side emphasized counterterrorism measures.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Private communications with senior Swedish officials involved in the negotiations and at the Justice Ministry.

See also statements by the Swedish Minister of Justice, Gunnar Strömmer, "Strömmer (M) om nya Natoavtalet med Turkiet" [Strömmer (M) on the new NATO agreement with Turkey], *Sveriges Radio* (online), 11 July 2023, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/strommer-m-om-nya-natoavtalet-med-turkiet> (accessed 04 October 2024).

<sup>63</sup> Government of Sweden Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, "Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Justice Visit Türkiye", Press Release (Ankara, 23 January 2023),

The relatively limited pre-existing bilateral meetings between Swedish and Turkish armed forces and ministries of defence at the staff level are set to continue, and even expand. Following a recent Turkish initiative, another agreement dealing with education and exercises is currently being negotiated between the armed forces of the two countries. The next meeting between staff at the Swedish and Turkish ministries of defence is intended for 2025.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3

## Actors' Perceptions vis-à-vis Turkey

The following subsections describe how the NATO process impacted the views on Turkey both among Swedish and Finnish officials and the public opinion. The result was a clear deterioration on both levels, albeit expressed less outspokenly on the official level.

#### 3.3.1

### Official Views: Muted but Clear Loss of Trust

Our Swedish interlocutors underlined that the NATO negotiations and the newfound status as treaty allies have changed bilateral relations for the better. As difficult as the negotiation process was, interlocutors asserted that it had given them a much deeper understanding of Turkish threat perceptions, concerns, and priorities. It is too much to speak of a convergence of threat perceptions between Turkish and Swedish foreign policy elites as a result of this process, but there is now a greater understanding of Turkish perspectives on the part of the Swedish side.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as we discuss in the conclusion, the increasing unreliability of the US as an ally has further underlined the importance of Turkey in the eyes of its two Nordic allies.

Nevertheless, the difficult negotiations appear to have left a mark in both countries. Reading between the lines of some of the answers given to us by Swedish senior diplomats and foreign service officers, one gets a more nuanced picture than what they are trying to convey in their official capacity. The dragged-out negotiations meant more intense contact with Turkish officials on multiple levels, which has

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<https://www.government.se/articles/2025/01/ministers-for-foreign-affairs-and-justice-visit-turkiye/> (accessed 14 February 2025).

The first meeting was supposed to be held in September 2024, with the new Swedish foreign minister, Maria Malmer Stenegard, set to make Turkey the destination for her second official trip – after the customary first trip to Helsinki – as minister. However, the meeting was postponed due to technical problems with her plane.

<sup>64</sup> Interview SE002.

<sup>65</sup> Interview SE001.



increased the level of knowledge about Turkish negotiation tactics. One of our Swedish interviewees struggled to put into words what they had learned from this:

Of course, it is also the case that this process has created a [...] I am trying to find the right words, I won't say distrust, because the fact is that the process turned out well in the end, but it has created a knowledge, for better or for worse, about what kind of country Turkey is.<sup>66</sup>

Another Swedish interviewee said that “with Turkey, it is always a question whether you can trust them. The whole business with ISIS left a bitter aftertaste.”<sup>67</sup> They were referring to allegations from around 2014 and onwards that Ankara had allowed ISIS fighters to cross the Syrian border and receive medical treatment in Turkey, as they were seen as a useful counterweight to both the Assad regime and the Kurdish YPG militia.

At the same time, both interviewees downplayed the importance of the legacy of the difficult negotiations. One noted that no matter how individuals may feel, Swedish foreign policy is not dictated by emotions on the national level, but rather by what is in the national interest: “We have arrived at the need to understand an important NATO ally better.”<sup>68</sup> The other emphasized that “Europe cannot afford to lose Turkey,” arguing that “in the situation that we are in, we cannot divide countries into good or bad. We are going to need every grenade, so we need to have Turkey on our side.”<sup>69</sup> A third interviewee argued that the negotiations “had left surprisingly few sour faces” in the ministry.<sup>70</sup> All of our Swedish interviewees emphasized that Turkey is a key player in NATO, and that it is important to European security. Although they noted that Turkey was a “difficult” NATO member, some argued that the same could be said for France and other NATO member states, and “perhaps also, in the future, for the US”, as one Swedish interlocutor said when interviewed in September of 2024.<sup>71</sup>

In a similar vein, in Finland the legacy of the accession process is two-sided. On the one hand, it is considered to have had the positive effect of intensifying contacts between Finland and Turkey.<sup>72</sup> Among Finnish government officials, there is a generally favourable attitude towards Turkey thanks to the institutional memory from the years of Turkey's EU accession process, which Finland supported. Finland and Turkey have also co-chaired the UN Group of Friends of Mediation since 2010.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>67</sup> Interview SE004.

<sup>68</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>69</sup> Interview SE004.

<sup>70</sup> Interview SE006.

<sup>71</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>72</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>73</sup> United Nations (UN), *Group of Friends of Mediation* (New York), <https://peacemaker.un.org/networks/group-of-friends> (accessed 8 January 2025).

Turkey had been long seen as a partner, being a long-time EU candidate and a NATO member. Already during the pre-NATO accession process, Finnish officials had been aware of the necessity to have good relations with Turkey in case Finland one day wanted to join NATO.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the potential for longer-term damage from the NATO accession process is assessed as low – if no new problems ensue with Turkey within the Alliance.<sup>75</sup>

On the other hand, while it was clear in Finland that Turkey's issues were more with Sweden than Finland, Finnish interlocutors nevertheless emphasized that Turkey's rather audacious pursuit of self-interest in a critical moment for Finnish security damaged the trust basis of their bilateral relations. As one interviewee pointed out, trust is hard to build and easy to lose. Although Finland prefers to have Turkey on its side rather than against it, trust in Turkey's reliability as a partner is at the moment "rather selective". This means that Finland considers cooperation to be important, but it will rather focus on areas of clear mutual interest that do not go too deep into more sensitive areas, where Turkey's lack of reliability could become a problem.<sup>76</sup>

What particularly drew the ire of Finnish officials was the fact that Finland and Sweden were separated in the accession process, as Turkey proceeded to ratify only Finland's membership first. Finnish officials had made it clear to their Turkish counterparts that it was a key security interest of Finland to join NATO together with Sweden.<sup>77</sup> However, at the same time, the difficult NATO accession process also highlighted the need to learn to promote Finland's positions in Ankara to make sure that Turkey does not block Finland's interests within the Alliance. The conclusion that Finnish interlocutors drew from the experience was that Turkey will always put its national interest first, even if it is in opposition to allies' interests. This requires a "tit for tat" approach to cooperation: supporting Turkey on some issues to secure its support for Finland's interests in another field.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, the fact that Turkey is an uncertainty factor within NATO also increases its relative value within the Alliance, mainly due to its geographical location and military capability. This is in sharp contrast to Hungary, which also played the veto game but got less out of it.<sup>79</sup>

A likely consequence of the experience with Turkish unpredictability and unreliability is that Finland will not prioritize cooperation with Turkey particularly, given limited human resources and other priority partners. Cooperation will focus on low-hanging fruits and areas where both can gain some advantages fairly easily, such as the bilateral trade, which is set to reach €3 billion.<sup>80</sup> Turkey is generally seen as an attractive market with a young and well-educated labour force, and its green

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<sup>74</sup> Interview FI004.

<sup>75</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>76</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>77</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>78</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>79</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>80</sup> Interview FI004.



transition efforts could open up mutually beneficial opportunities for exporting Finnish know-how. Turkey is also considered a gateway to markets in third countries thanks to its connections in the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, but also in the US, which adds to its attractiveness as a trade partner for Finland.<sup>81</sup>

### 3.3.2

## Negative Public Sentiments and Positive Business Opportunities

Before the two Nordic countries decided to apply for membership, they had sought assurances from NATO members that the process would be quick, including from Turkish officials. Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu had assured his Swedish counterpart during a meeting in Brussels that Turkey would not object to Sweden's membership in NATO. The Finnish President had also received similar assurances from his Turkish counterpart during a telephone conversation. Therefore, the two were taken aback by President Erdoğan's statements on 13 May 2022 that he could not support their applications. Part of the irritation and anger in both Sweden and Finland stemmed from a feeling of having been deceived by Ankara.

The reason why the two Nordic countries had sought such assurances was that they feared being left in a "grey zone", having declared their intention to join the Western Alliance in spite of Russia's explicit threats while not yet enjoying the protection of Article 5 that would come with full membership. This concern was particularly strongly felt in Finland, given its exposed situation with a long shared border with Russia. Turkey received a lot of negative attention in the Finnish media and public discourse during the process, and some interviewees assessed that it may have impacted Turkey's image to the extent that Finnish citizens might not choose to travel to Turkey for their holidays.<sup>82</sup> Traditionally, it has been particularly through tourism that Finns have held generally favourable attitudes towards Turkey, although recently the generally negative views on the Middle East have also impacted Turkey's image to an extent.<sup>83</sup>

Turkey's domestic political situation and the increasingly authoritarian developments under the Erdoğan regime have negatively impacted views in Finland. With regard to the desirability of bilateral cooperation, Turkey's policies are drawing criticism from the left side of the political spectrum especially. It is considered a particular risk to export arms to Turkey as it might unilaterally invade Syria again. The political left is also the traditional home for the small group of Kurdish activists in Finland, who have been a driver of criticism and negative public opinion on Turkey, although to a much

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<sup>81</sup> Interviews FI001 and FI003.

<sup>82</sup> Interviews FI003 and FI006.

<sup>83</sup> Interview FI004 and FI006.

lesser extent than in Sweden, and with no tangible impact on Finland's official Turkey policy.<sup>84</sup>

Public sentiments towards Turkey in Sweden are generally not very favourable. It is true that Sweden was a strong proponent of Turkey's EU accession in the early years of that process. Carl Bildt, Swedish prime minister (1991–1994) and later foreign minister (2006–2014) from the centre-right Moderate Party, long viewed Turkey as holding significant strategic potential due to its geographic location and because it was a democratic Muslim country. He saw Turkish EU membership as a major potential asset to the Union. Foreign Minister Anna Lindh (1998–2003) of the Social Democratic Party was initially sceptical of Turkey's EU accession but eventually became a strong advocate for Turkey's membership in the EU. As democratic reforms in Turkey abated and then reversed, Swedish government officials remained principled in their position that Turkey should be allowed to join the Union if it returned to and concluded the reform process. Swedish foreign aid to Turkey – termed “reform cooperation” in official texts and discourse – has been aimed at supporting such a process. Nevertheless, Swedish politicians became increasingly vocal in their criticism of democratic backsliding, increasing authoritarianism, and human rights abuses in Turkey.

The Swedish Kurds are divided politically, with some support the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), others the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM, formerly known as HDP), and some the PKK. Left-wing Kurds (in particular HDP/DEM supporters) have been more vocal and influential in the Swedish discourse and in shaping public opinion about Turkey.<sup>85</sup> Among the Swedish political parties, the Left Party has been a consistent and strong advocate of the Kurdish cause. The Greens, Liberals, and Social Democrats (the largest party in Sweden) have also focused on the issue, and the Social Democratic Party has DEM as its sister party in Turkey. A number of Kurdish and Assyrian parliamentarians, activists, and public figures in Sweden have given assurances that the public's attention to human rights abuses in Turkey has not slipped.

While Swedish media reporting about Turkey has not been studied comprehensively, it is safe to say that it is predominantly negative, often focusing on violence against women, the war with the PKK, infringements of civil rights, and – in recent years – the Turkish military adventures abroad. During Sweden's NATO accession process, President Erdoğan's many demands regarding, for example, the extradition of alleged PKK supporters from Sweden – which varied from a few dozen to more than a hundred individuals that he, at different times, wanted Sweden to send to Turkey –

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<sup>84</sup> Interviews FI003, FI004, and FI006.

<sup>85</sup> Bahar Baser, Idris Ahmedi and Marie Toivanen, “The Transnational Activism of the Kurdish Diaspora and the Swedish Approach to the Kurdish Question”, in *Migration from Turkey to Sweden: Integration, Belonging and Transnational Community*, eds. Bahar Baser and Paul T. Levin (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2017): 228–260.

drew both ire and ridicule in Sweden. As the process dragged out, some argued that NATO should throw Turkey out of the Alliance instead of allowing him to stop enlargement.<sup>86</sup> According to a poll towards the end of the process, 59 per cent of Swedes believed that it was wrong for the Swedish prime minister to have promised (at the Vilnius summit) to support Turkey's accession to the EU. Only 12 per cent thought this was a good thing.<sup>87</sup>

Moreover, the extremely liberal Swedish laws on freedom of speech and assembly meant that a range of groups and individuals with a variety of motives could organize protests that were at least partially aimed at provoking policy-makers in Ankara, and thus disrupting the negotiations. Pro-PKK groups repeatedly organized demonstrations – both with and without permits – in which they displayed PKK flags or accosted effigies of the Turkish president. During the same period, three individuals – all foreign nationals or with recently acquired dual citizenship – conducted several demonstrations where they burned copies of the Koran and otherwise attempted to insult Muslims.<sup>88</sup> Swedish authorities tried to restrict such demonstrations, among other things with a temporary ban on Koran burnings, but these attempts were repeatedly rebuffed by the courts. Meanwhile, the Koran burnings were widely publicized in the international press and generated anti-Swedish demonstrations in several Muslim-majority countries. These included a violent riot that left the Swedish embassy in Bagdad in flames, and a terrorist attack in Brussels in which two Swedish football fans were shot dead. As a result of the waves of protests, threats, and attacks against Swedish targets, the Swedish Security Service in August 2023 raised the national threat level to the second-highest level.

Actions (and inactions) on the part of both the Swedish and the Turkish government arguably made the situation worse. Rather than defuse the situation, the Turkish government fuelled the anger over the Koran burnings with heated public rhetoric, which angered many in Sweden, as it led to an overall deterioration of the domestic

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<sup>86</sup> Jens Wenzel Kristoffersen, "Militäranalytiker: Erdogans utpressning bör få Nato att tänka om" [Military analyst: Erdogans blackmail should make NATO rethink], *Altinget* (online), 17 February 2023, <https://www.altinget.se/artikel/militaranalytiker-erdogans-utpressning-bor-faa-nato-att-tank-om>;

Olle Wästberg, "Turkiet hör inte hemma i Nato" [Turkey does not belong to NATO], *Dagens Arena* (online), 07 February 2023, <https://www.dagensarena.se/opinion/turkiet-hor-inte-hemma-nato/> (both accessed 04 October 2024).

<sup>87</sup> "DN/Ipsos: Väljarna vill inte ha Turkiet i EU" [DN/Ipsos: Voters do not want Turkey in the EU], *Dagens Nyheter* (online), 04 September 2023, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/dn-ipsos-valjarna-vill-inte-ha-turkiet-i-eu/> (accessed 05 October 2024).

<sup>88</sup> One of the three is a Danish far-right provocateur who had acquired Swedish citizenship after earlier being denied entry into Sweden for burning Korans. The second is an Iranian immigrant protesting against the treatment of women in Iran. And the third was an Iraqi asylum seeker who was recently murdered during a live broadcast on social media, only days before the expected verdict in his hate crime trial. His charges were dropped but his accomplice was found guilty. Christina Anderson and Amelia Nierenberg, "Man Who Burned Quran in Stockholm Is Killed", *New York Times* (online), 30 January 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/30/world/europe/salwan-momika-quran-sweden-killed.html> (accessed 15 February 2025).

security situation. The Swedish government did what it believed Swedish laws allowed it to do: It condemned the Koran burnings publicly and initiated legal changes that would allow for greater room to restrict them in the future. One of the three foreign-born activists was arrested in absentia (he had returned to his native Denmark), and another was denied asylum in Sweden and charged with hate crimes.<sup>89</sup> From the Turkish point of view, however, there was little understanding as to why Sweden would allow such provocative demonstrations unless they really wanted them to take place. At the very least, the fact that a terrorist organization could parade through the streets of Stockholm with their flags on full display while the police protected them only underscored the belief in Ankara that Swedish anti-terror laws were too weak. These events led to a temporary pause in the NATO accession negotiations and worsened the bilateral relationship between Sweden and Turkey.

As the negotiations between Sweden and Turkey dragged out, there was also an increasing sentiment in Swedish public discourse that Ankara was merely using Sweden as leverage to push Washington to approve arms sales, in particular the sale of new F-16 fighter jets and the associated modernization kits.<sup>90</sup> This was widely seen as disingenuous and drew condemnation. While support for NATO accession remained high in Sweden, many also criticized what they saw as the Swedish government's eagerness to please Ankara by making concessions.<sup>91</sup>

However, trade figures between Turkey and the two Nordic countries show that, despite unfavourable public opinion, there has been an openness to engage with the Turkish market. According to Business Sweden, Turkish-Swedish trade volume has grown around 4 per cent annually to almost €27 billion in 2020, with the main export commodities being telecommunications equipment, iron ore, paper, and pulp.<sup>92</sup> Bilateral trade volume between Finland and Turkey has also grown, to nearly

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<sup>89</sup> Anita Nissen and Måns Lundstedt, "Quran Desecration Rallies in Scandinavia and the Netherlands: The Formation and Transnational Diffusion of an Anti-Muslim Protest Tactic", *Journal of Intercultural Studies* (September 2024): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2024.2404584> (accessed 15 February 2025).

<sup>90</sup> Wolfgang Hansson, "Erdogans utspel om Sverige handlade än en gång om F-16" [Erdogan's Statement about Sweden Was Once Again About the F-16s], *SVT Nyheter* (online), 13 July 2023, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/erdogans-utsapel-om-sverige-handlade-an-en-gang-om-f-16> (accessed 17 October 2024); "Erdogan försöker utnyttja sitt bästa förhandlingskort maximalt" [Erdogan Is Trying to Maximize His Best Negotiating Card], *Aftonbladet* (online), 23 January 2023, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/kolumnister/a/zE8L3r/erdogan-forsoker-utnyttja-sitt-basta-forhandlingskort-maximalt> (accessed 17 October 2024).

<sup>91</sup> Matthias Karlsson, "Sverige måste sluta att buga för Erdogan" [Sweden Must Stop Bowing to Erdogan], *Hallandsposten* (online), 19 December 2022, <https://www.hallandsposten.se/asikter/ledare/sverige-maste-sluta-att-buga-for-erdogan.9b41114d-74d9-4a3f-8fba-f95aa20ecdf2> (accessed 17 October 2024).

<sup>92</sup> Embassy of Sweden, *Trade with Türkiye* (26 February 2018), <https://www.swedenabroad.se/en/about-sweden-non-swedish-citizens/turkey/business-and-trade-with-sweden/trade-with-turkey/#> (accessed 17 October 2024).

€3 billion in 2023, and the aim is to reach €5 billion.<sup>93</sup> Opening up for arms exports to Turkey following the successful conclusion of the NATO accession negotiations could be seen as an opportunity, and businesses in the arms industry and related fields were described by a senior Swedish diplomat as favouring greater cooperation with Turkey.<sup>94</sup> This optimistic assessment is not shared by the representatives of the Swedish arms industry that we interviewed, however.

### 3.3.3

## Risks and Opportunities Related to Turkey's Quest for Strategic Autonomy

In Finland, the interviewees saw Turkey as an important player and partner, despite the challenges that come with Turkey's independent foreign policy choices. The interlocutors described Turkey as "playing with two sets of cards" and looking in every direction – partly due to its geographical position, which allows for and necessitates it to do so.<sup>95</sup> In the best case, Turkey could be a valuable strategic partner for Europe in countering both Russian and Chinese influence in Africa and Central Asia and help increase the influence of the West – but "with a Turkish flavour".<sup>96</sup> However, Turkey's interests – especially in North Africa – do not often align with the interests of the EU, and the latter also considers Turkey to be a regional competitor.<sup>97</sup> Turkey has, for example, helped fuel anti-colonialist narratives and anti-Western sentiments, also against the EU. After a military coup in Niger and the subsequent ousting of French forces and cutting of ties with the EU, Turkey filled the vacuum not only in defence cooperation but also in energy and mining.<sup>98</sup> Then-EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, clearly expressed his frustration over the state of affairs in August 2024 in no unclear words: "We should be worried about what's happening in Africa. [...] Today, there's [*sic*] no Europeans left in Libya – only Turks and Russians."<sup>99</sup> Turkey's military capability and experience is acknowledged in Finland, but the results of its intervention policy get mixed reviews. On the one hand, it is good that Turkey has maintained a presence in places where Europeans were forced out, such as Somalia, but on the other hand, Turkey has

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<sup>93</sup> "Finland Aims to Boost Bilateral Trade with Türkiye to \$5.5 Billion", *Türkiye Today* (online), 3 October 2024, <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/world/finland-aims-to-boost-bilateral-trade-with-turkiye-to-5-5-billion-61036/> (accessed 18 October 2024).

<sup>94</sup> Interview SE003.

<sup>95</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>96</sup> Interviews FI003 and FI006.

<sup>97</sup> Interview FI004.

<sup>98</sup> "Turkey, Niger Agree to Enhance Energy, Defence Cooperation", *Reuters* (online), 18 July 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/turkey-niger-agree-enhance-energy-defence-cooperation-2024-07-18/> (accessed 17 January 2025).

<sup>99</sup> "EU Official Targets Türkiye over Growing Influence in Africa, Libya", *Türkiye Today* (online), 26 August 2024, <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/eu-official-targets-turkiye-over-growing-influence-in-africa-libya-44788/> (accessed 17 January 2025).

become entangled in several conflicts (such as in Syria and Libya) in its attempts to enhance its regional power position.<sup>100</sup>

The multi-level game Turkey is playing – making moves such as expressing interest in joining BRICS+ while simultaneously attempting rapprochement with the EU – makes it a difficult and unpredictable partner, which is bound to draw the ire of its Western partners regularly. It is a core Finnish interest to have good and functioning EU-NATO relations, but Turkey's conflict with the Republic of Cyprus is particularly obstructive.<sup>101</sup> A further risk factor from the Finnish viewpoint is Turkey's strongly personalized foreign policy decision-making, which is mostly in the hands of the president. This is particularly visible in Turkey's relations with Russia, which are seen as essentially a personal relationship between the two presidents.<sup>102</sup> The personal touch reduces the overall predictability of Turkey's long-term foreign policy line and raises questions in the minds of Finnish foreign policy and defence officials about Turkey's future direction after Erdoğan leaves office, especially with regard to its relations with Europe.<sup>103</sup> Domestically, our Finnish interlocutors pointed to the presence of extremist movements – both nationalist and religious – in Turkey, which adds to the uncertainty and, together with a history of military coups, contributes to a certain tension between the political leadership and the armed forces.<sup>104</sup> Combined with the recent authoritarian turn of the Erdoğan regime, the domestic political risks related to it, and more acute foreign policy unpredictability make it harder to plan for a long-term partnership with Turkey, according to one of our Finnish interviewees.<sup>105</sup>

Concerns over Turkish foreign and security policy also have consequences for the prospects for increased arms exports and cooperation between arms industries in Turkey and the Nordic countries. Two representatives from the Swedish arms industry interviewed for this report spoke about the impressive achievements of the Turkish arms industry in recent years, but noted that Turkey is not a prioritized market for any Swedish companies due to the risk of corruption, the strong ties of major Turkish corporations to the president's family, and the reputational risks stemming from an often unpredictable – and sometimes aggressive – Turkish foreign and security policy. Swedish arms production companies are reluctant to export lethal equipment to Turkey for fear that it would be used against the Kurdish minority in Turkey and in neighbouring countries. This would both be bad for the brand and unpopular among employees, the interviewees noted, as well as potentially constitute a violation of Swedish law. Moreover, cooperation with Turkish companies would expose Sweden to the risk of having exports to, for example, Ukraine blocked due to political disagreements.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Interview FI006.

<sup>101</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>102</sup> Interview FI001.

<sup>103</sup> Interviews FI001, FI003, and FI006.

<sup>104</sup> Interviews FI003 and FI006.

<sup>105</sup> Interview FI003.

<sup>106</sup> Interview SE005.



Turkey's complicated balancing act between its role as a NATO member and EU candidate country on one hand, and its desire to seek closer relations with Russia and China on the other, implies a fundamental divergence in threat perceptions with the two Nordic countries, who see Russia as the predominant threat to European security. A senior Swedish diplomat noted that it was "complicated, to say the least, to have such a large and important NATO member that doesn't share our – the US and EU's – understanding of this war".<sup>107</sup> Although it supports Ukraine militarily based on a firm commitment to the country's territorial integrity, Ankara has not joined the EU's sanctions regime, and some have raised concerns that it has helped Russia circumvent the sanctions.<sup>108</sup> There is a risk that Russia "sees this as an opportunity, to be able to affect the situation via Turkey".<sup>109</sup> However, Turkey's trade volume with Russia declined sharply in 2024 due to US secondary sanctions and export restrictions.<sup>110</sup> Another interviewee pointed to Turkey's recent interest in joining BRICS+ and noted that it would be somewhat odd ("piquant") if Turkey were to be the only BRICS+ member that is also both a NATO member and an EU candidate country.<sup>111</sup>

From the point of view of Finnish officials, the main risk related to Turkey's quest for strategic autonomy is its relations with Russia. Turkey's recent nuclear power plant deal with Russia is a source of concern in Finland, as it will lead to a dangerous dependency on Russia. Furthermore, Turkey's decision to procure Russian S-400 missile systems, which resulted in Turkey's exclusion from the American F-35 fighter jet programme, is viewed unfavourably in Finland and has puzzled analysts worldwide.<sup>112</sup> This is particularly relevant for Turkey's place in a future European security order, as its Russia ties could pose a risk if Turkey were integrated into the European security architecture more closely. While Turkey's good relations with Russia can be beneficial for Ukraine during the war because it enables it to act as a mediator for agreements on the grain deal, prisoner exchanges, and other pressing

<sup>107</sup> This interview was conducted before the arrival of the second Trump administration.

<sup>108</sup> "Turkey Faces Scrutiny as Exports to Russia Surge, Fuelling Concerns of Sanctions Evasion", *Euronews* (online), 27 November 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/11/27/turkey-faces-scrutiny-as-exports-to-russia-surge-fuelling-concerns-of-sanctions-evasion> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>109</sup> Interview SE003.

<sup>110</sup> Adam Samson, Chris Cook and Max Seddon, "Turkey's Trade with Russia Drops After US Pressure", *Financial Times* (online), 30 April 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/67bab8b5-51ad-4823-8fa8-93472b62f192> (accessed 10 January 2025).

<sup>111</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>112</sup> Interview FI001;  
 "US Imposes Sanctions on Turkey over Russia", *BBC News* (online), 14 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55311099>;  
 Tom Karako, *Coup-proofing? Making Sense of Turkey's S-400 Decision*, Missile Threat Project (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 15 July 2019), <https://missilethreat.csis.org/coup-proofing-making-sense-of-turkeys-s-400-decision/> (both accessed 10 January 2025).

matters, our Finnish interlocutors noted that, in a wider European context, Turkey could paralyse decision-making and break the current consensus on Russia.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Interview FI006.



# Conclusion

Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, and went through difficult negotiations with Turkey in the accession process to secure its ratification of their memberships. Cooperation in the fields of security and defence between Turkey on one hand, and Sweden and Finland on the other are undergoing a transformation as a result of the latter two countries' NATO accession. Especially in Sweden there is, in many respects, a clear “before” and “after”.

The Swedish government will likely want to rebalance bilateral relations from the unequal relationship that characterized the NATO accession process, where Turkey held all the leverage. This does not mean reneging on any of the commitments made in the negotiations, but rather that Swedish officials are likely to press for Swedish priorities to be foregrounded.<sup>114</sup> One of the foremost Swedish interests is greater Turkish cooperation on transnational organized crime, as Turkey – with its policy of allowing individuals who make significant real estate investments in Turkey to attain citizenship – has become home to a number of criminals trying to escape the Swedish justice system. Turkey has proven uncooperative with Swedish officials' efforts to apprehend one of the most high-profile leaders of a criminal gang in Sweden, who has Turkish citizenship and has allegedly been hiding in Turkey.<sup>115</sup>

Turkey's main argument for delaying Finland and Sweden's NATO ratifications was the demand that the aspirant new members implement stricter terrorism policies, to show understanding for Turkey's main security concern. At the same time, Turkey itself showed little understanding for Finland and Sweden's security concerns, with the threat posed by Russia significantly heightened during the NATO accession process. Geographically, Finland and Sweden are located at the opposite end of the European part of the transatlantic Alliance from Turkey and have a markedly different security environment. This plays an important role in the mutual understanding (or lack thereof) of each other's security interests. Especially with regard to Russia, Turkey cannot be induced to fully align with its European partners. Still, if the parties wish to improve bi- and trilateral security cooperation in the longer run, not only do Sweden and Finland need to keep up the efforts agreed in the Trilateral Memorandum that paved the way for Turkey to ratify their membership in NATO, but Turkey must

<sup>114</sup> Interview SE001.

<sup>115</sup> Adrian Ericson, “Gängledaren vinner mark – har trumfkort” [Gang leader wins territory – has a trump card], *Svenska Dagbladet* (online), 16 January 2025, <https://www.svd.se/a/5EMjKW/gangkriget-rawa-majids-foxtrot-starker-sin-position-i-sverige> (accessed 17 January 2025).

also show more consideration of its allies' security needs and concerns, particularly in its relations with Russia.

Both Sweden and Finland had been proponents of Turkey's quest for EU membership. While Sweden had had occasional difficulties in its bilateral relations with Turkey already before the NATO accession process, Finland had maintained mainly good relations with the country, and Turkey's delaying of their NATO accession was the first major negative experience. Right or wrong, Ankara's strategy to delay Finland and Sweden's NATO accession was perceived by many in the two Nordic countries as having more to do with other Turkish domestic and foreign policy goals than with Ankara's stated demands. It was therefore seen as a rather personal snub in a very tense security situation, where swiftly joining NATO, and preferably together, was the expressed wish of both Finland and Sweden.

There is, then, some bitterness remaining from the difficult accession negotiations as well as continued hesitancy about Turkey's ambivalence vis-à-vis Russia. Still, there is also a newfound recognition of Turkey's importance to the Alliance and a willingness to work with Turkey on shared concerns. Finnish interlocutors viewed Turkey as a partner that one needs to cooperate with and that is good to have on one's side, even though they expressed uncertainty whether that will remain the case in the future. Despite the divergent threat perceptions and many concerns noted above, the perspectives of many Swedish diplomats on Turkey are ultimately informed by the understanding that it is too important a player to alienate. As a senior Swedish diplomat put it, "we cannot afford to lose Turkey." This understanding of Turkey's importance has been greatly reinforced by the US administration's belligerence towards its European allies and signalling of its intent to weaken or remove its security umbrella over Europe. The US vice president's speech in Munich, and especially the treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during his visit to the White House on 28 February 2025, were mentioned by our interlocutors as transformative moments in the transatlantic relationship. When asked again in late March 2025, another senior Swedish diplomat stated unequivocally that "Turkey has *absolutely* become more important to Europe" as a result of the recent breakdown in the transatlantic relationship.<sup>116</sup>

There is also some overlap between Turkish interests and those of its new Nordic allies. Neither Sweden nor Finland has a strong desire for the EU to develop a distinct EU-leg within or apart from NATO. As new members of the North Atlantic Alliance, both are keen to have NATO remain the main arena for defence cooperation and have – at least historically – viewed French entreaties for greater European strategic autonomy with some scepticism. This they share with Turkey, which, as a non-EU member, has obvious reasons to oppose such developments. However, with Trump's return to the White House, this matter has simultaneously become more urgent and

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<sup>116</sup> Follow-up to interview SE003 in late March 2025.

more complicated. One of our Swedish interlocutors noted shortly after the US elections that if the US president continues to undermine the Alliance, perhaps even taking more dramatic moves in this direction, the incentives to develop European strategic autonomy will grow.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, when contacted again in late March, they went further, stating that the scepticism towards the French advocacy for greater European autonomy has been replaced by gratitude.<sup>118</sup>

This creates opportunities as well as risks for Turkey. There is an opportunity for Turkey – as the second largest military power in NATO – to play a bigger role as a security provider on the European continent if the US reduces its commitments. However, there is also a risk that the EU's role in procurement and defence will be strengthened in response to US policies, which could leave Turkey outside the arenas where important decisions are taken. Ankara has agency in helping to determine whether it is the opportunity or the risk that materializes. Recent developments in domestic Turkish politics, such as the jailing of the main opposition candidate, entail a marked move towards deepening autocratization, which does not make it easier for Turkey's EU allies to give it a greater role in the remaking of the European security architecture. It is likely that the Turkish president sees Europe's greater dependence on Turkey for European security as protection against tough EU responses to his crackdown on the opposition. In that, he is likely correct. However, it could also have meant an opportunity for Turkey to become much more deeply involved in the evolving security architecture on the continent, which Ankara is now possibly squandering by spending its "diplomatic capital" on domestic repression instead.

When it comes to divergences in the Turkish and Nordic postures vis-à-vis Russia, the differences can be overstated. While Turkish dependence on Russian energy appears to be deepening, there is also a clear competitive dimension in the Russian-Turkish relationship. The two have backed different sides in the conflicts in Syria, Libya, and to some extent in Nagorno Karabakh. Turkey is the only NATO ally that has been engaged in combat with regular Russian forces in the post-Cold War era, with losses of life on both sides. Turkey has no interest in a decisive Russian victory in Ukraine, which would leave Russia the dominant power in the Black Sea. This is a concern that Ankara shares with the two Nordic countries, which fear that a Russian victory in Ukraine would embolden Russia. Moreover, Finnish and Swedish policy-makers are worried about a horizontal escalation of the war in Ukraine to Eastern Europe and/or the Baltic Sea. Turkey, which is also located in Ukraine's relative vicinity, would be directly affected by a horizontal escalation in the Black Sea region.<sup>119</sup> This is not to say that a complete alignment on how the three view Russia policy is realistic, only that there is more overlap than is sometimes acknowledged. To increase the prospects for alignment on policy, the two Nordic countries could underline these shared interests in restraining Russia in talks with Turkey and provide support to

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<sup>117</sup> Follow-up to interview SE003 in January 2025 after the US elections.

<sup>118</sup> Follow-up to interview SE003 in late March 2025.

<sup>119</sup> Interview FI003.

Turkish efforts to constrain the Russian presence in the Black Sea and elsewhere while also pressing their security concerns in the Baltic Sea to their Turkish counterparts.

Finally, Turkey and its European allies share an interest in providing stability in Syria. The Syrian civil war generated the 2015 refugee crisis, which has had destabilizing effects on politics in Turkey as well as on the continent. Sweden and Turkey took in roughly similar shares of Syrian migrants relative to their populations, and it was a shock to the system in both countries. If the new Syrian regime fails to consolidate its control over diverse militias and provide a modicum of economic security for all Syrians, there is a risk that the country will fall back into sectarian conflict, with all the negative consequences that entails. As Europeans have understandable concerns over the new Syrian leader's jihadist background, it is therefore in both their and Ankara's interests to support him and contribute to the stabilization of the country. Supporting and rebuilding Syria after more than a decade of civil war is a shared objective between Turkey and its new Nordic allies, Sweden and Finland, and a possible opportunity for cooperation moving forward.

5.

## Policy Recommendations

In light of the prospect of a US that, under Trump, is a less reliable ally and security provider on the European continent, Sweden and Finland should make an effort to maintain good relations with Turkey as a capable NATO ally. This includes making good on promises regarding counterterrorism policies given to Turkey during the accession negotiations, while expecting reciprocity from Ankara on its commitments on, for example, organized crime.

Sweden and Finland should maintain a principled stance on the rule of law and democracy at home as well as in Turkey as an EU candidate country, while also realizing the limited leverage they have over Ankara.

A low-hanging fruit for the two Nordic countries is to continue to support the deeper integration of Turkey into the CSDP and the PESCO project on military mobility.

The urgent need for support to and reconstruction of Syria could offer an opportunity for cooperation and synergy, especially with regard to Swedish foreign aid expertise and the capacities of the Turkish construction industry. If US-led efforts to find a compromise in northern Syria that is acceptable to the Syrian Kurds, Ankara, and Damascus fail, Sweden could offer to facilitate dialogue to avoid escalation.

A more predictable foreign and security policy from Turkey, a return to a more wholehearted embrace of the Western Alliance, and steps to ease domestic repression could help facilitate a Nordic push to integrate Turkey into European security structures and enable greater cooperation with the Nordic arms industry. However, given the structural concerns in Sweden about the Turkish defence industry and the Finnish industry's limited size, results may remain modest in the defence industrial field.

In the absence of a more dramatic reorientation of Turkish foreign and domestic policy, Turkish policy-makers should make an effort to show a better understanding of Finnish and Swedish security concerns and refrain from unreasonable demands in order to avoid further damaging the fragile trust basis.

# Abbreviations

AKP	<i>Justice and Development Party</i>
ASAP	<i>Act in Support of Ammunition Production</i>
CSDP	<i>EU's Common Security and Defence Policy</i>
DEM	<i>pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party</i>
FETÖ	<i>Fetullahist Terror Organization</i>
ISIS	<i>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</i>
ISP	<i>Inspectorate of Strategic Products</i>
MEC	<i>Military Equipment for Combat</i>
OSCE	<i>Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe</i>
PESCO	<i>Permanent Structured Cooperation</i>
PJM	<i>Permanent Joint Mechanism</i>
PKK	<i>Kurdistan Workers' Party</i>
PYD	<i>Kurdish militant Democratic Union Party</i>
UN	<i>United Nations</i>
YPG	<i>Kurdish militant People's Protection Units</i>

# List of Figures

Figure 1: Swedish Export of Military Equipment to Turkey

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